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Some Limitations of the Case Method: Experiences in a Management Development Program

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The case method as used by faculty "stars" in a management development program may (1) facilitate learning that does not question the underlying values of executives or the policies of their organizations and (2) inhibit the learning that would enable the executives to question these basic factors and to improve the application of new learning in the home organization.

Learning may be defined as the detection and correction of error. Learning that results in the detection and correction of error without changing the underlying policies, assumptions, and goals may be called single-loop. Double-loop learning occurs when the detection and correction of error requires changes in the underlying policies, assumptions, and goals. A thermostat is a single-loop learner because it detects when the room is too hot or too cold. A thermostat would be a double-loop learner if it questioned why it was set at 65 degrees or why it was measuring heat [Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978]. Double-loop learning is usually the responsibility of top management [Argyris, 1977].

My purpose in this article is to suggest that the case method of instruction may unintentionally reinforce individual and organizational forces against double-loop learning. If so, then there exists a contradiction or paradox — namely, that a method of instruction designed to enhance individual, and through it, organizational double-loop learning, may inhibit both. The basis for these sugggestions comes from observations and tape recordings made of a three-week executive program. Company X, a multibillion-dollar company, sends about thirty of its top executives twice a year to an off-site location. The case method is the predominant mode of instruction. The faculty is selected from among the "stars" of case method teaching from such schools as Harvard, Virginia, Southern Methodist, Stanford, and Yale.

The Case Method: Espoused Theory

There is a variance of views about the theory of instruction implicit in the case method as a mode for learning. However, the faculty members interviewed agreed on five features as central to the case method. They are: (1) the use of actual problems of organizations, (2) the maximal possible involvement of the participants in stating their views, inquiring into others' views, confronting differences, and making decisions, resulting in (3) a minimal degree of dependence on the faculty members who, in turn (4) hold the position that there are rarely any right or wrong answers, that cases are incomplete and so is reality, and (5) who will strive to make the case method as involving as possible through the creation of appropriate levels of drama.

The faculty members in this program varied widely as to the degree to which they conformed to the theory that they espoused. Not only did they vary as individuals, but the same individual varied in different situations. For example, when basic concepts and procedures had to be taught, many instructors lectured. When an opportunity arose for "replaying the bidding," some used role playing. Simulations, films, and straight long lectures were also included.

Most of the faculty members interviewed believed that all these teaching modes represented the case method. They believed that a lecture in the

context of a case was significantly different from a lecture without a case. Their arguments implied an inconsistency. If their view was correct, then the case method of instruction included all modes of instruction. If so, what is the truth value of saying in the brochures and during the opening sessions that the case method *differs* from all others when it *includes* all others?

Faculty and Student Behavior During the Case Method Sessions

It is possible to provide a picture of how the faculty members acted during the case study sessions by referring to the following six techniques:

1. *Ask the executives questions about the case that the faculty member deems important*. For example, "Why do you think you decided not to buy . . .?" "What has design engineering been doing?" "Why haven't we said anything about them?" "Any other views on that issue?"
2. *Point out new directions emanating from the differences of the participants' views*. "Some have some dramatically opposed views." "As I hear it, there are three different views. They are . . . ." "You differ from Y (in this way)." "So you also differ on this issue?"
3. *Ask questions to explore the reasoning of the executives*. "Taking your diagnosis, where does that place company X, in a better position or in a worse position?" "Is it your view that sales people always make shoddy guesses?" "What leads you to choose a decision that you believe has only a 50/50 chance of being correct?" "How are you using that analogy?" "Will you tell us how you reached that conclusion?"
4. *Ask questions to clarify and keep the discussion going*. "What is the status of the bid?" "What leads the company management to conclude . . . .?" "Why doesn't anybody seem to care about a year's supply of inventory?" "How do we feel about the pricing method?" "What did you say was wrong with the organization?"
6. *Create appropriate drama and tension*. "Wait a minute, X just said these guys pull numbers out of the air and you want to make them top dogs." "X, are you going to let Y get away with that?" "Do you *really* mean to tell this group that you believe marketing people . . . ?" "OK, you have two minutes to make a decision." "How do you defend your decision, given what most of these people are saying?"

The Faculty Dominates Classroom Interactions

A rough indication of student dependence is the degree to which faculty members controlled the interactions (1) by asking students questions that they would then answer, (2) by answering specific questions asked by the students, or (3) by presenting statements of the facts about a particular case. The frequency with which students directed their comments to the faculty members to get their responses to, or evaluation of, their point of view is also an indication of dependence.

When the faculty members were not involved in the discussion or dialogue that occurred, I inferred that students were displaying independence in the seminar. The clearest instance of this independence was considered to be student carrying on a dialogue with another student. Here students responded to one another's analyses in a manner that did not involve the faculty members. A simple count was made of the number of comments or questions that one student directed to another for each seminar session. The more such student-to-student responses there were, the greater the student independence. At the same time, a count was made of the number of questions asked or statements (of widely varying length) made by the faculty member. This count served as an index of the control that faculty members exerted on a session. The assumption made was that the more questions asked or statements made by the faculty member, the less opportunity there would be for student dialogue. Furthermore, it was also assumed that the number of student-to-student responses would be somewhat dependent on the number of faculty responses.

An analysis of this crude count showed that in all cases except one (F), the number of student-to-student responses was significantly lower. The faculty reponses to students and vice versa were at least twice the number of the student-to-student responses. In the case of F, he controlled the interactions highly at the outset and permitted more student responses once, as he reported in the interviews, he was assured that the students would conform to his overall diagnosis.

The most frequent strategies used by most of the faculty were to advocate positions, to ask questions, and to make connections among responses, in ways that kept them in control of the learning. Some possible consequences for learning include: (1) issues that are important to the students may be ignored, (2) students may select or distort information to win, and (3) student dependence on the faculty member may increase (see Table 1).

Table 1
Faculty Actions and Their Consequences

Faculty Behavioral Strategies	Possible Consequences
1. Get the topics introduced that the instructor feels are important	Issues important to students may be ignored
• select responses	
• reinterpret student responses	
2. Establish controversy	Leads students to select/distort information to be consistent with their position
• direct people with different opinions to resolve differences	Maximizes students' efforts to unilaterally control and/or produce solutions
• misinterpret student positions to polarize	
• take votes	
3. Reveal principles at end of sessions	Increases dependence on faculty member during the class session
• lecture at end	
• make sure principles don't get produced during session	
4. Maintain control of interactions and topics discussed	Little discussion of topics of interest to students but not to faculty
• cut off some lines of discussion	
• select whom to call on	
• inject comments to focus discussion	
5. Induce students to generate incorrect solutions if someone gets the "best solution" early	Discouragement of good work
	Confusion among students
• ask for alternatives	Decreased probability that students will work for solutions
• bring up topics for discussion	

Mystery is Associated with Mastery: Withholding Information to Control Learning

During the interviews, all members of the faculty mentioned that they spent several hours before each class reviewing their notes even though they may have taught the case several times. The purpose of the review was to make sure that they remembered the important details, to refresh their memories on traps to avoid, and to re-examine the strategy that they would use to bring out important points. The faculty members always had a list of questions that they believed were vital to understanding the case.

Two features impressed me about these files. First was their completeness. They represented thoughtful action maps for understanding the case. Second, the information was usually made public toward the end of the session.

Why were the key questions not given ahead of time? Because, as one faculty member put it, "That would blow the whole game." The executives would have a way of solving the case. They, and the ones to whom they passed on this information, would never have to go through the learning process. Thus, by making the maps public in a piecemeal fashion, the faculty member could remain in control of the learning processes (especially the involvement and the drama).

The participants were not unaware of this possibility. They soon concluded that the faculty mem-

bers did have their views, which they exposed little by little at appropriate moments. The participants learned to listen carefully to every question, and to observe the position given to the answer on the blackboard. All these represented cues to be watched carefully because they were possible signs for uncovering the mystery of the mastery of the faculty member.

Faculty Members Take Responsibility for Protecting Students and Themselves

One possible consequence of student dependence on the faculty for managing the learning process is that students can hold a faculty member responsible for any situation that may make the students vulnerable. The faculty members reported during the interviews that they understood and accepted this responsibility. Whenever they felt that a student was vulnerable, they carefully and covertly controlled the situation to prevent distress. For example:

> "X appeared to me to be confused and reticent. I decided not to call on him"; "Y was upset so I thought I would, as carefully as I could, get the pressures away from her"; "Z made a perfectly stupid point, and I felt that he should somehow become aware of it"; and, "One thing a teacher must never do is use her position to embarrass someone."

The faculty members applied the same covert protective action to themselves. For example:

> "In the first ten minutes, I knew I was in trouble"; "The discussion was slow, and I could not figure out what to do"; "I tried to get us off the point but was unsuccessful"; and, "I was not able to summarize and highlight appropriately."

In a review of all the tape-recorded data, in no instance were the evaluations stated openly in the class session. In other words, the faculty members were unilaterally acting to save face for the executives as well as for themselves. In only one situation did the faculty member "let things get a bit out of hand" (a quotation from the faculty member, indicating that he felt primarily responsible for the event). After the session was over, the most actively involved executives in the episode met in small groups to discuss the situation. They did not discuss it during the class nor did they present the issue for discussion in any other class.

What happened was that some of the most vocal executives felt that they had been manipulated by the faculty member into competing with each other. The result was that, during the next class, one of the most vocal members announced that he wasn't going to get "caught" again, and he then retreated from future discussion. The observer noted that the rate of participation initiated by the other executives in the class session diminished significantly. In order to keep the discussion alive, the faculty member had to call on the executives more often. Also, for the first time, several executives were observed to say in response to the faculty member's summary of their views, "No, I did not say that. My position was . . . ."

The confrontative atmosphere was reduced when a new faculty member was introduced. It appeared that the executives strove to deal with each faculty member separately and distinctly. Probably out of a sense of fairness, they withheld making negative judgments about a faculty member based on their experiences with previous faculty members.

But in some cases the experiences were additive, in the sense that the executives found it easier to ask a question about the faculty member's strategy without appearing negative or angry. For example, toward the end of the course, one executive asked the faculty member in a matter-of-fact manner: "Are you in the phase of getting us to vote or trying to get us to take sides, or do you want general comments?" The faculty member appeared a bit flustered but answered: "No, I am just trying to get the views on the board." The faculty member did not take the opportunity to ask what was behind the executive's question. Nor did the executive ask the faculty member how the reply was an answer to his question.

The faculty members appeared to protect the executives from discomfort (and perhaps themselves from low ratings) by hiding their expectations of low performance on the part of the executives. For example, some of the faculty members felt the group was "slow" or "less active than other groups," or "not too well educated in basic concepts." They were careful never to discuss these evaluations with the executives (although they discussed them among themselves and with the officers in charge of executive education).

The Students Protect the Faculty

From our interviews, we learned that the executives were aware of many of these issues. However,

they never discussed them with the faculty. Hence, the faculty members were not asked to discuss their expectations of lower performance or their evaluation of the group as being slow. Yet embedded in these issues is important food for thought for the executives. Similarly, the executives rarely discussed the evaluations that they were making of the faculty with the faculty. Moreover, when the executives evaluated the faculty anonymously at the end of the program, they focused primarily on the faculty members' teaching behavior and strategies rather than on their theories of learning or their reasoning processes. Consequently, they focused on limited aspects of the faculty members' impact.

Games and Camouflaging

The ways by which the faculty protected the executives and vice versa are illustrative of the games people play in many organizations, including this one. Company X had conducted two studies, before the seminar, which indicated problems of conformity, camouflaging of errors, minimizing risks, and executives unilaterally controlling events in order to save face (their own and others'). The faculty and the executives in the session, therefore, combined to create the conditions that are similar to the ones identified by the two studies as causes of organizational problems that the course was to reduce in the first place. For example, the environment during the seminar made it highly unlikely that people (faculty or students) would take self-initiated risks, would ask questions about underlying policies, and, hence, would help managers to reflect and correct their own problem-solving errors: behavior that company X valued.

The executives also learned that faculty members may behave incongruently from what they espouse and that this incongruency is not discussable inside the class. Some learned that it is discussable *outside* of class, and all concluded that faculty members deal with inconsistency the way they themselves do in the back-home situation. Examples of the inconsistencies include:

1a. There are no right or wrong answers; *yet*,

1b. Some faculty members do take positions and give answers. Sometimes those who insist there are no correct answers also appear to change their minds and give some answers.

2a. There are many different views possible; *yet*,

2b. Faculty members seem to select viewpoints and organize them on the board in a way to suggest that they have a preferred route.

3a. People should have only a finite amount of time and information to solve a case; *yet*,

3b. Faculty members (because they have taught the case many times) have much more time and information.

4a. People should expose their ideas, maps, strategies for solving the problem; *yet*,

4b. Faculty members do not expose many of their ideas and strategies about the case.

5a. Faculty members should strive to minimize dependence of the executives on themselves; *yet*,

5b. Faculty members strive to manage the case discussion and tend to keep tacit their game plan as well as their views of the effectiveness of the problem-solving process.

Finally, very few attempts were made by the faculty to relate the executives' behavior in the classroom to their behavior back home or to the factors that might inhibit the organization's capacity for detecting and correcting important errors.

For example, during the discussion of a case, one of the executives said, "I think this would be the normal policy [of our company] and I do not agree with it." There was laughter among the executives. The faculty member did not take this opportunity to have the group explore the connection of the learning to the back-home situation. For example, he could have asked, "Do others agree that this is normal policy? If so, why so; and if not, why not?"

Summarizing the features of the classroom interactions that have been identified above, the faculty members (1) dominate the classroom interactions, (2) pace and direct the learning, and (3) take on the responsibility for protecting the students and themselves from losing face. The students appear to accept the faculty members' role and indeed hold them responsible precisely for these actions.

The result is a series of games and camouflaging of the games. For example, the theory of learning espoused by the faculty members is significantly different from that implied by their actions. However, the discrepancy between their theory and their actions is never discussed because the faculty members give cues that it is not discussable. Executives and faculty members evaluate each other covertly but they do not make the evaluations public and hence subject to test. The faculty and the students assert that education must be applicable

in their work situation, yet they limit the applicability to technical concepts and exclude the concepts that are related to executives and organizational learning in the work setting.

Generalizability of These Conclusions

The most commonly recognized way to assess the generalizability of observations is to make further observations. Indeed, we are conducting further observations. Another method is to show that these observations are consistent with other observations made in different settings; but in order to do so, we must be clear that we are not comparing apples with oranges. This requires that the categories being used to compare are at the same level of abstraction and have similar properties.

It is helpful if the categories that are used come from a theory. The advantage is that a theory contains propositions that specify, ahead of time, the relationships among the categories (concepts). This feature, in turn, makes it possible to make predictions in any context that can be publicly tested.

A theory that is relevant to this particular inquiry exists [Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978]. Briefly, the fundamental assumptions are that human beings hold theories in their heads that they use to design their actions. There are two kinds of theories of action. There are espoused theories — in this case, the espoused theories that the faculty members hold about learning with the case method of instruction. There are also theories-in-use, which are the theories that people actually use.

The difference between espoused theory and theory-in-use in *not* the difference between what people say and how they behave. This difference is one of espoused theory and actual behavior. The theory-in-use is the one people use to produce the actions observed. For example, the faculty espoused that the students should be minimally dependent on the faculty. The observations indicate that most of the faculty's actions encouraged dependence. So far we have a difference between espoused theory and actions. If we could state the theory that must be in the faculty's heads to have produced the actions that were observed, then we would have the theory-in-use.

Elsewhere Schön and I have suggested that people appear to hold many different espoused theories, and that they behave in different ways; but almost all the variance observed in behavior may be explainable by the same theory-in-use [Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978; Argyris, 1976a, 1976b]. The theory-in-use is called Model I. Model I has three basic components: (1) the behavioral strategies that people use in order to satisfy (2) their governing values, and (3) the consequences of these two for the environment.

The behavioral strategies of Model I theory-in-use are designed to keep the actors (in this case, the faculty members) in control, to permit them to advocate their position (in this case, about what kind of learning should go on) in such a way that the faculty members win. The behavioral strategies are also unilaterally designed to protect the executives and the faculty from probable embarrassment.

The *governing variables* (underlying goals and values) of Model I are: (1) to control the purposes of learning as the faculty sees them; (2) to maximize the winning and minimize the losing of the faculty; (3) to suppress or prevent the rise of negative feelings, and (4) to focus on the intellectual aspects of the learning.

People programmed to use Model I theory-in-use tend to create an environment for learning (no matter what situation or system they are embedded in) that remains within and reinforces Model I. The environment becomes self-maintaining; hence, it takes on the features of a system, and therefore may be called an O-I (organizational) learning system. Briefly, O-I learning systems manifest win/lose dynamics, intergroup rivalries, games that make it possible to withhold information without making that explicit, and camouflage to hide the games when they violate the espoused theories of individuals or the policies of the organization [Argyris & Schön, 1978].

Many of these Model O-I features were illustrated in the observations reported above. For example, note the competitive dynamics between students and faculty members, the withholding of covert evaluations that faculty members and students were making of each other, the camouflage people created to act as if this were not the case, and the consequences of the fact that the relationship between actions and the inhibition of double-loop learning was never explored.

It may interest the reader to know that the theory of action predicts that people programmed with

Model I will act only in congruence with this Model because it is not possible for people to behave in accordance with theories-in-use that they do not hold. The prediction means that people may behave very differently from the way that they advocate and unilaterally control but they should not be observed, for example, combining advocacy with inquiry. Similarly, there may be a wide variety of actions observed in a learning system but all of them should conform to the Model O-I categories.

These predictions are not difficult to test because one episode that violates them can be the basis for disconfirmation of the theory. The reason that one instance can disconfirm the theory is that the theory assumes that people programmed with Model I cannot design actions that are congruent with a theory-in-use that is different from the governing variables and behavioral strategies identified in Model I. If exceptions are observed, they should confirm the theory. For example, people should be shown to hold (by the use of some independent assessment) a different theory-in-use. This is why I have found it possible to tell people (programmed with Model I) that they will not be able to behave in accordance with theories that they espouse (which are different from Model I), to have them deny that this will be the case, and have the prediction come true in ten different episodes when the same individuals had additional opportunities to detect and correct their error because they were free to observe the errors of others who were trying to produce theories-in-use other than Model I [1976a].

Implications

In conjunction with this study, I interviewed six directors of executive programs about their criteria for success of their programs. They reported two criteria: (1) teaching new ideas and unfreezing old beliefs, and (2) establishing new friends among executives and faculty members who can serve as resources to solve problems at some future time. They also reported that these were the most frequently mentioned criteria in the evaluations made by the participants.

Let us assume that the first objective is met by this and other similar programs. The more important question is, what difference does it make? Observations in the back-home setting suggest that (1) the new ideas and unfreezing related to double-loop learning were rarely transferred to the organization, and (2) the executives rarely learned about the degree to which they contributed to the low transferability of the ideas that they had learned. The problem was not that the executives did not learn new ideas; the problem was that they rarely used them.

The second criterion of success implies that executive programs are valued because of friendships made. This reason is not to be deprecated. Nor should it serve as a basis for faculty confidence. The danger embedded in this reason is not simply that we are valued for being educational go-betweens. The danger is that making friends is so important to our participants that it may act to create a halo over our programs and unintentionally hide important gaps such as the one of double-loop learning.

There is another danger. In the early stages of academic disciplines, the emphasis is on discovery and invention. As a field matures, the leading scholars discover gaps and inconsistencies in the models, especially when they move toward using them in actual situations. Operations researchers and microeconomists, for example, have recently discovered that they produce different inventory models or models of their firm, depending on whether the purpose is only for discovery or to produce a solution in an actual situation. It is the latter models that become more intellectually challenging.

Consequently, if executive programs do not take applicability seriously, they may find that someday they can attract only faculty members who have been touted as leaders of yesterday's models. Moreover, the executives who have graduated from business schools populated by faculty members concerned with application may evaluate as less attractive the executive programs that do not deal with new models.

These observations also raise some important questions for the case method. One leading scholar of the case method said to his class:

> "The central belief underlying our use of cases is that you will acquire the analytic and communication skills needed to perform effectively . . . far more quickly and efficiently through becoming actively involved in well-structured case discussions than you will through more passive methods of learning. Learning by participating in discussions where a large part of the burden is on you to discover the central lessons and insights is far more effective than learning by more traditional academic methods."

The above statement ignores the more subtle passivity of students and faculty members that we observed regarding double-loop learning. It also ignores the relatively poor record of applying double-loop ideas in the back-home situation.

In any case discussion, there are three aspects that require examination. The first is the case the executives read. If possible, they should be actual cases from their own firm. One advantage of an in-house executive program is that it can focus heavily on company cases. The second aspect is what goes on between the faculty and the executives. There is much people can learn about their leadership and problem-solving styles as well as their ways of dealing with novel ideas by reflecting on what goes on during the seminar. In this connection, I should acknowledge that we did not tape record the discussions the executives had in their small study groups because the faculty feared that this might upset the executives. Interestingly, the executives invited us to observe after they got to know us. Where we were able to observe, we found the same dynamics as those in the classroom. The third aspect is related to the problems of how to apply new ideas in the back-home situation. Executives are rich sources of information about real and imagined factors that inhibit and facilitate double-loop learning. Executive programs of the future can begin to build on this knowledge.

When executives are helped to learn new ideas, to understand how they and their organization may inhibit double-loop learning, to design and implement actions to overcome these problems in the back-home situations, then, and only then, will executive education close the loop from the classroom to the organization. When this happens, executive education and organizational development will be integrated into one continuous on-going process.

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